

STRIVING FOR AMY: A PERSONAL AESTHETIC

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The first chapter of this descriptive paper outlines a problem, proposes a solution and poses three questions for me to answer after completion of research. The problem was to bring an emerging ceramic style into all of my pieces rather than just the few I have mastered. The solution was to create three sets of new forms and make them repeatedly until they boasted the sought-after style.

Chapter 2 chronicles the research of creating, morphing, detailing and finally mastering these new forms. Chapter 3 summarizes the experience and answers the three aforementioned questions:

- (1) What is my personal definition of a successful pot?
- (2) How does the undulating style affect the functionality of the pot?
- (3) How does the Campbell tartan glazing complement or detract from the pot's form?

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

After working for production potters for three years, I came to graduate school to learn how to successfully work for myself. While making other people's designs was a good skill-building endeavor, I knew I wanted a more personal form of expression for my own work. While studying at the University of North Texas, I found that along with increased throwing precision and glazing accuracy, a unique ceramic style emerged that I can call my own.

I want my forms to be stylistically charged but also completely useable. I make functional pottery. It is composed primarily of dinnerware such as plates, mugs and bowls, along with accessory pieces like mixing bowls, pitchers and butter dishes. When I first knew I wanted to make pots forever, I studied with a woman master in Japan named Ryuko Suda. She encouraged me to make pots for everyday use: for example, as a Japanese woman even she did not make the traditional tea set ware because she did not practice the tea ceremony every day. I learned an important lesson from her: make only what people really need, hence only dinnerware and a few accessories.

I love the ocean and want my pieces to have the feel of water. I throw porcelainous stoneware thin and wet so that the clay will bulge and indent like ocean waves. I then add extra ripples with my fingers to exaggerate the liquid feel of the clay. While strongly apparent in certain pieces, such as tall bowls and dinner plates, this

distinctive style was not as evident in many of my lesser-practiced forms (fig. 1). This emergent fluid style excites me most about my three and a half years of practice and study at the University of North Texas.

Glaze surfaces are also very important to me as they represent my heritage. My maternal grandmother was a full-blooded Scot, and I have designed a loose plaid pattern in the colors of the Campbell tartan, overlaid with iron stains as a tribute to this heritage. In this way I wish to acknowledge both observable and hidden aspects of my biological makeup.

I have formulated clay and glazes to work both in an oxidized firing, which produces the blue, green, yellow and white of the traditional Campbell tartan and in a reduction firing, which produces the reds, purples, blues and tans of the ceremonial Campbell colors (figs. 2 and 3). With the clay and glazes, as well as the combination of firing methods, I have a large color palate with which to work.

#### Statement of the Problem

Although I am proud to honor my Scottish heritage with this glazing technique, I was not sure that it suited the undulating forms that are my primary concern when producing pottery. And, although the dinner plates, tall bowls and lidded jars demonstrate the fluid aesthetic which I call my own, I proposed to work to bring elements of this style into other forms that I make. After completing this work, I addressed the following questions, answered in chapter 3:

1. What is a successful pot in my perspective?
2. How much (if any) does this fluid alteration of the pot affect its functionality?

3. How does the Campbell tartan glazing technique complement or detract from the pot's form?

#### Methodology

My primary focus was to bring a fluid throwing technique to other pieces besides my few comfortable standard forms. While there are many forms that were possible to explore, I chose to limit my investigation to three sets: the salt and peppershaker, the sugar and creamer, and the sushi set. Each set is comprised of several distinct and dissimilar forms that needed to be designed to work individually as well as function harmoniously within a set. These forms offered new challenges not only in body design but in surface glazing as well.

## CHAPTER 2

### WORKING THE PROBLEM

I began researching this problem by looking to the forms of potters I admire: most notably the cruet and tray sets of Robin Dwan, the pitchers and cups of Victoria Christen, and the oblong platters of Stephen Robison and Kathleen Guss. My first step was to attempt to replicate each form I admired as closely as possible, foregoing any functional or aesthetic issues that arose. Many of these I did not fire.

After at least one successful copy of each form was completed, a new set of copies was made that retained the same basic forms of the original pieces, yet were noticeably altered to fit the specific functions I had ascribed. Robison and Guss' oblong platters shrunk in size until they comfortably and snugly fit a four-piece serving of sushi, wasabi and ginger. Victoria Christen's pitcher also shrunk to become a creamer, and Robin Dwan's cruets were removed altogether so that only the oblong holding tray remained—to be filled eventually with my own salt and pepper shakers.

The next step in my journey was to resolve the functional issues that needed to be addressed concerning the specific uses for these sets of pieces. Sushi plates are traditionally oval or rectangular, raised on feet and curve downward like a bowl in the center (fig.4). The long shape of the sushi plate is functional: sushi is generally served in two long rows. A sushi plate's feet are purely aesthetic—delicate food looks best when displayed on a delicate plate. But the down-turned curve in the center serves the sushi diner no purpose. Food tends to slide down the edges and lump unattractively in the



middle like a couple in an old saggy bed. This detail of the “traditional” sushi plate was easily eliminated in my version. Likewise eliminated was Victoria Christen’s loopy vertical handle on her pitcher and Robin Dwan’s restrictive ninety-degree angle on her cruet tray.

The most difficult pass of the journey was to cast the ghosts of my idols out of these liberated forms and to fill the aesthetic void with myself. Focusing on the sushi plate, I played with the decorative feet, experimenting with balls, cubes and long spindly legs until I lighted on a design that incorporated my “wavelike” aesthetic: little rolled up spirals. These rolls look like the tips of ocean whitecaps; they are delicate yet extremely sturdy (fig. 5).

Moving to the body of the plate, I wondered how I could incorporate the undulating feel of the more successful pieces into a flat plate. Creating a wavy eating surface would be even more dysfunctional than the sushi plate’s traditional center curve, so I resolved to restrict the alterations to the plate’s rim. Using a cheese cutter, I experimented with depth and severity of cut on the rim until I decided on a shallow, subtly waving trim in the edge. To accentuate the cut, I then rotated the removed shavings and reattached them to the plate’s rim. At awkward junctions between the shavings, I attached a shell-inspired rivet made of grolleg porcelain, stamped with a conch’s spiral (fig. 6). Here I successfully integrated the fluid style while retaining the plate’s functionality.

The grolleg rivet was the first detail to transcend all of my proposed forms and to start to bring them together as a unified body of work. The salt and pepper shaker trays

also feature the shaved and reattached rims, but the sugar jars and cream pitchers do not. These two items undulate and curve within the forms themselves, because the rims could not be altered without affecting the fit of a lid or the pour of liquid. These pots do, however, boast the unifying shell-stamped rivet.

Beyond the fluid form and three-dimensional detail that makes up my aesthetic, is the pot's surface treatment. I have chosen to retain the nature and reasoning of my tartan glazing technique, but I do want to make sure the fluid, useable form is readily noticeable and accessible under the plaid colors. Like a woman who dresses to accentuate her curves, my pottery's functionality and form must be considered before glazing begins. I found that layering all of the colors in succession across the surface resulted in a dark, muddy effect (fig. 7). Realizing that the primary background color of the Campbell tartan is white, I began to add more of that color to the glazing palette. The white brightened, lightened and distinctly separated the other colors, making for a more inviting surface. The deep finger grooves in the salt and pepper shakers were suddenly more visible. Even the iron stain became more distinct and effective over the matte white background (fig.8).

While talking to other potters as well as consumers, I found that most people prefer a white, uncluttered eating or drinking surface. It gives a more sanitary illusion, and in a practical sense, a washer can easily tell when it is clean. So once again, I restricted my personal alterations primarily to the rim of plates and to the outside of tea bowls, pitchers and jars, leaving the inside clean and uncluttered, save for one detail: a very subtle, white-on-white grolleg slip spiral (fig.9).

Now that these new pieces have been successfully formed in both a functional and personal way, and glazed in a manner that both speaks of my heritage and reveals the nuances of the forms, I have completed the first step of a life-long journey: the search for Amy.

## CHAPTER 3

### SUMMARY

While working through my problem, I kept the questions that I had posed to myself close at hand. When I felt a piece had turned out successfully, I forced myself to answer why, and to jot down the reasons. The questions helped me to focus my research, pay much more attention to detail, and consider aspects of my work from not only my own perspective but from that of a viewer as well. These questions made me realize what is most important in my goal of successful work.

But what is a successful pot in my perspective? As a dinnerware potter who hopes her pieces will be put to everyday use, I feel that functionality is of utmost importance in determining a good pot. However, as a student of the visual arts, I feel self-expression and personal voice must acknowledge themselves; therefore, aesthetics is of equal importance. Each of these two traits can be broken down into limitless categories; however I will give examples of the most personally important categories below.

When I began creating the creamers, I wanted them to pour well; that is not as easy a declaration as it sounds. Perhaps the most important area to focus on a well-working creamer is the spout itself. Visually, I had always preferred a lip that was pulled up vertically rather than the traditional pulled-out horizontally lip (figs. 10 and 11). However, there is a reason that this horizontal lip is deemed “traditional”—it works. While a vertical lip is more aesthetically pleasing to my eye, a creamer with such a spout

needs to be turned nearly upside-down before liquid will channel out. If the pot is too full, the liquid will simply take the easiest route: over the lip on either side of the spout. While designing the spout to these new creamers, I kept both my desire for aesthetics and my need for functionality in mind, and came up with a spout created separately from the creamer out of a thin slab. The result was an exaggerated spout that pulls up and out in equal measures (fig.12). This spout, when attached atop a subtly worked throat, channels liquid easily and pours neatly.

Handles are a large consideration both functionally and aesthetically. With the small handles on my sugar jars, I found it difficult to balance a size large enough for gripping but small enough as to not look awkward on the small pot. Eventually, I reached a satisfactory median size. The handles on the creamers posed problems as well: not only in size but in position as well. I mentioned earlier that as much as I enjoy the balance Victoria Christen's loopy, vertical handle brings to her pitcher, I realized after replicating it that it is awkward to hold onto and difficult in maneuvering the pitcher to pour. My own creamer, after its many incarnations, ended up tilting backwards on itself, and I eventually placed the handle on the inner curve near the bottom of the back. From this position, it is easy to grab as well as to maneuver the pot into pouring.

Weight is another important issue. A creamer or pitcher cannot be too heavy because the liquid inside will add several more pounds; the same goes for a vase or a jug. I have discovered, however, that certain pieces can be too light. I have always equated light and thin pots with elegance and superior technical skill. However, when first making my sushi sets I found that the thinner the walls, the more they warped in the kiln.

Not only that, but a double helping of hot rice snapped one of my sushi plates in two. So I began forcing myself to throw thicker, and at first it felt like blasphemy. Eventually, however, I reached a “healthy” thickness that would not warp in the kiln. Surprisingly, I enjoy the new heft to my plates: they feel sturdier, seem more reliable, and look less unintentionally wavy and fluid.

Of course, the more intentionally wave-like and fluid aesthetic is what I have been and still am striving for in the voice of my pots—but not when it interferes with the function. When I began to look critically at my previous work, I found that some of my pots’ usefulness was diminished by the undulations. I began eliminating these waves of motion from the functioning areas of the pots. As I mentioned in chapter two, I restricted the fluid aesthetic of my sushi plates to the rims and feet. The sugar and creamer set, however, retain their fluid movement within their bodies but have untouched rims: on the former so that the lid will fit snugly, and on the latter so that liquid will pour smoothly (figs. 13). On the pots where the fluidity is restricted most, I must be careful to glaze accordingly so that the few undulations will be more visible.

The obstruction of the pot’s fluidity by the busy tartan motif is the nature of my third question. When I spoke in chapter two of the dark, “muddy” effect of heavy glazing, I was referencing this style of layering as the most obscuring to a pot’s undulations. I began really studying the form of each pot so that I could glaze each bulge, each indentation, and each ripple individually. Here are two examples of the exact same forms glazed with the same plaid pattern and the same tartan colors, but gone about in different ways: figure fourteen shows my former style of plaid glazing over the entire

pot with no regard to form. Figure fifteen has been glazed after carefully considering the folds and appendages. Also note the brightening, clarifying effect the addition of fifty percent more white glaze brings to the surface.

The glazing problem is one I will continue to work with for the rest of my career, and the balance between fluidity and good function is a question I will struggle with as long as I continue to throw pots. I feel that my personal definition of what makes a successful pot will constantly change as I address new problems and gain greater clay skill. Although I am satisfied with the results of my research here at the University of North Texas, I know I have only completed one step in my lifelong ceramic journey.